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ABSTRACT

Although secondary school principals may believe that instructional leadership should be their most important role, many complain about their inability to succeed in this endeavor. They typically cite as reasons the numerous other tasks needing their everyday attention. After briefly summarizing recent research substantiating instructional improvement as principals' primary responsibility, this paper reports survey results from a random sample of 721 public high school principals in Ohio. Questionnaires were mailed to 130 principals; 122 were returned, and 116 were analyzed. Respondents were asked to rank 14 reasons that hindered or prevented them from working on instructional improvement. Data analysis revealed that Ohio principals perceive two major obstacles: (1) the time spent handling student discipline problems and (2) faculty resistance to new instructional improvement ideas. None of the other reasons was selected by more than 50 percent of the respondents. Demographic factors (age, years of experience, and school enrollment) appeared to be unrelated to principals' selections. If data gathered from other states support these results, steps must be taken to remedy or eliminate the two impediments to Ohio principals' instructional improvement efforts. Included are a sample questionnaire and five references. (MLH)

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What Hinders or Prevents Secondary Principals From Being Instructional Leaders?

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In 1970, the National Association of Secondary School Principals brought together a study group composed of six educators who represented a wide variety of secondary school interests and experience. The report of this study group identified seven major task areas of responsibility for the principal. The first of these task areas focused on the role of the principal as an instructional leader. The report stated:

"The principal is an educational leader, with all that the term implies. His cardinal function is the *improvement of instruction* which will enhance the learning experiences of his students. The principal, then, is first and foremost an instructional leader: All his other activities must directly support this central function, or else he jeopardizes his "*raison d'etre.*"[1]

Indeed, every textbook on the principalship examined by the writer in twenty years of teaching graduate courses in school administration stresses the instructional leadership role of the school principal.

The research of the 1980s supports this emphasis on the instructional improvement role of the principal. For example, Clark and his colleagues, after a review of 1200 studies of urban schools concluded that in successful schools, the behavior of the school leader is crucial in determining school success.[2]

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Edmonds, in an investigation of elements that make schools effective, discovered that such schools have strong instructional leadership from the principal.[3]

A study in California commissioned by the Education Committee Task Force of the California State Assembly revealed that in schools where student achievement is higher than might be expected, principals provide strong instructional leadership and support.[4]

Finally, a study in Texas by Krajewski revealed that secondary principals believe that providing leadership in instructional improvement should be their most important role.[5]

Though secondary principals may believe that leadership in bringing about instructional improvement should be their most important role and several research studies also support this concept, principals with whom the writer has worked over the years have regularly complained about their inability to succeed in this vital role. They typically cite as reasons the number of other tasks that they must address in their every day duties as principals.

The writer compiled a list of the most often mentioned of these tasks, and decided to try to discover with a formal questionnaire which of these tasks or reasons principals believed most prevented them from working on instructional improvement in their schools.

A random sample, according to six strata of size, was drawn from Ohio's 721 public senior high schools. The sample included 11 high schools with enrollment under 300 students, 41 high schools with 300 to 600 students, 27 high schools with 601 to 1000 students, 14 high schools with 1001 to 1500 students, 12 high schools with 1501 to 2000 students and 11 high schools with more than 2000 students.

Demographic data from the questionnaire revealed the following information regarding the age and experience of the principals included in the sample:

Age Range	Number of Principals
30-35	11
36-40	33
41-45	30
46-50	22
51-55	16
56 and over	4

Years as a Principal	Number of Principals
1-5 Years	34
6-10 Years	30
11-15 Years	34
16-20 Years	13
21-25 Years	3
26 or More Years	2

130 questionnaires were mailed to the high school principals and 122 were returned. 116 were useable for statistical analysis, thus yielding a valid sample of 18 percent of Ohio's senior high schools.

Following are the directions that were given to the principals on the questionnaire:

Listed below you will find 14 reasons that principals themselves have identified as reasons that hinder or prevent them from working on actual improvement of the instructional program in their high schools. Please examine all of these reasons. Now that you have examined these reasons, please place a 1 by the reason you believe most prevents you from working on instructional improvement at your school. Place a 2 by the next most important reason, a 3 by the next most important reason, and so on. You need rank only 5 reasons.

_____ The time I have to spend on discipline problems, student and parent hearings, etc. interferes with the time I need to work on instructional improvement.

_____ The time I have to spend on observing and evaluating teachers interferes with the time I need to work on instructional improvement.

_____ The time I have to spend on getting the custodians and other non certified personnel to do their jobs right interferes with the time I need to work on instructional improvement.

_____ The time I have to spend dealing with the teachers associations, i.e. grievances, contract management, etc. interferes with the time I need to work on instructional improvement.

_____ The time I have to spend on problems of all kinds connected with the athletic program interferes with the time I need to work on instructional improvement.

_____ The time I have to spend on keeping my superintendent happy; i.e. gathering information, getting answers, and doing things the superintendent asks me to do interferes with the time I need to work on instructional improvement.

_____ Demands on my time from community groups and other community relations duties interfere with the time that I need to work on instructional improvement.

_____ Resistance from faculty to new ideas on instructional improvement hinders or prevents me from bringing about instructional improvement.

_____ The time that I spend working on state, federal and/or county reports, etc. interferes with the time that I need to work on instructional improvement.

_____ Given all the conflicting ideas about what the schools should do (and how to do it), I am not sure what would really constitute instructional improvement.

_____ I am not sure that I have the necessary knowledge and skills to move this school toward instructional improvement.

_____ Frankly, I am not sure my superintendent really wants me to spend a lot of my time on trying to bring about instructional improvement.

_____ The time that I have to spend on book and supply orders, seeing salesmen, managing school accounts, etc. interferes with the time I need for work on instructional improvement.

_____ Dealing with law suits and legal problems interferes with the time I need to work on instructional improvement.

_____ Other

Analysis of the data collected revealed that secondary school principals in Ohio perceive that they have difficulty in working toward instructional improvement that comes from two sources: (1) The time they

spend dealing with student discipline problems and (2) faculty resistance to new ideas on instructional improvement.

Forty-five (39 percent) of the principals said that the time they had to spend on student discipline problems was the number one reason that hindered or prevented them from working on actual improvement of the instructional program in their schools. Twenty-one principals (18 percent) listed discipline problems as their second reason, while twelve principals (10.5 percent) listed it third. An additional eleven principals (9.5 percent) listed discipline problems as a fourth or fifth reason. Altogether 89 of the 116 principals (77 percent) listed student discipline problems as either hindering or preventing them from the time needed to work on instructional improvement. Only 27 principals in the total sample of 116 did not identify the problem of discipline as hindering or preventing their work on instructional improvement.

The next reason chosen by principals in any significant number as hindering or preventing them from working on instructional improvement was "resistance from faculty to new ideas on instructional improvement."

Nineteen principals (16.5 percent) indicated that faculty resistance to new ideas was the number one reason that hindered or prevented them from working on instructional improvement in their school. Another twenty-one principals (18.1 percent) chose this reason second, while sixteen more principals (13.8 percent) chose it third or fourth. Altogether, sixty four principals (56 percent) picked faculty resistance among their top five reasons that hindered or prevented them from working on instructional improvement in their schools.

None of the other reasons was selected by more than fifty percent of the principals included in the sample. The category "other" also did not

yield any reasons in any significant number that principals identified as hindering or preventing them from working on instructional improvement.

A cross tabulation with the factors of age, years of experience, and school enrollment using a chi-square test did not reveal any significant relationship between these three demographic factors and the reasons picked by principals that hinder or prevent them from working on instructional improvement.

The literature from the field of school administration certainly stresses the principal's role in the area of instructional leadership. Research previously cited in this paper reveals the importance of the principal's role in effective school instructional programs. According to Krajewski's study, principals themselves believe that instructional leadership should be their most important role. However, the data from this study revealed that secondary principals in Ohio perceived that they have difficulty in achieving improvement in the instructional program that comes from two sources: (1) The time that have to devote to student discipline problems and (2) faculty resistance to new ideas on instructional improvement.

It is clear that additional data need to be collected from secondary principals in other states. However, if the data from this study are supported by additional data from other studies, it is equally clear that steps will need to be taken to remedy or eliminate the two factors Ohio principals presently perceive as hindering or preventing them from bringing about needed instructional improvement.

NOTES

1. The Principalship, Job Specifications and Salary Consideration for the 1970s, National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1970.
2. David L. Clark et. al., "What Aids Success in Urban Schools?," The Kappan (March 1980): 467.

3. Ronald Edmonds, "Effective Schools for the Urban Poor," Educational Leadership, (October 1979): 16-17.

4. California State Assembly, Assembly Education Committee Task Force for the Improvement of Present In-Service Training for Public School Administrators, The School Principal: Recommendations for Effective Leadership, (Sacramento, California, 1978), p. 5.

5. Robert J. Krajewski, "Texas Principals--Implications for Perceived Roles," National Association of Secondary School Principals, Bulletin 61: December, 1977, p. 16-19.